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# THE FIRST PARTHIAN OSTRACON FROM IRAN

By A. D. H. BIVAR

THE OSTRACON FROM THE Qūmis excavation (Pl. I) bears inked characters in the Parthian script, and is palaeographically comparable with the numerous ostraca from the excavations at Nisā in Soviet Turkmenistan.<sup>1</sup> Many of these bear dates reckoned according to the Arsacid Era of 247 B.C., typical figures being A.E. 194 (52 B.C.), A.E. 216 (30 B.C.), and so on. The Qūmis ostrakon is thus likely also to belong to the 1st century B.C. The transliteration table for this script has been prepared by Diakonov and Starkova.<sup>2</sup> Entirely diagnostic of Parthian, as against other derivatives of the Aramaic script, is the sloping left and bowed right leg of the letter *pē*, seen twice in the fourth line of the fragment.

It has to be noted, in dealing with this form of script, that several of the characters are rather similar. Distinction between them always requires care, and at times indeed presents real difficulty. As in Imperial Aramaic, *rēš* and *dāleṭ* are indistinguishable except from the context. In this period the diacritical point is never used. The forms of *hē* (undotted *h*), *sāmek* (undotted *s*), *tāw* (undotted *t*), and even *qōp* (*q*) show some marked resemblances, and the *pē* itself can at times be confused with one or other of them. The general form of all five characters is that of a footballer's goalposts. Theoretically, the *hē* can be distinguished because its horizontal crossbar passes over the left leg to the left, and the right leg is higher than the crossbar. In the case of *sāmek* on the other hand the left leg rises above the crossbar, which does not pass beyond. The same is the case with the *tāw*, to be distinguished (when one is fortunate) by its more flowing *ductus*, and the fact that the crossbar is not always in contact with the left leg. In the *qōp* the crossbar curves upward above the left leg, and is integral with the right. This portion is here thickly drawn, and a gap may be found between it and the top of the left leg. A sequence which shows well the similarities and differences of some of these letters is the word *ptsyk* in line 2 of Nisā Document 1089.<sup>3</sup> In practice, as inspection of the Qūmis ostrakon will show, differentiation of these characters depends to a large extent upon the context, and familiar profiles of appropriate words.

Scholars who first worked upon the Nisā ostraca were of the opinion that the language they expressed was Parthian, written with Aramaic ideograms, and the Iranian terminations represented by phonetic complements.<sup>4</sup> A later view, since developed by Sznycer,<sup>5</sup> is that the language of these texts is syntactically Aramaic, though their vocabulary, like that of Imperial Aramaic, is loaded with Iranian technical terms. The view of Sznycer carries

<sup>1</sup> I. M. Diakonov and V. A. Livshits, *Dokumenty iz Nisi I v. do n.e.*, Moscow, 1960, provides the principal collection of texts and reproductions. A further selection will be found in I. M. Diakonov and V. A. Livshits, "Noviye nakhodki dokumentov v Staroi Nise", *Peredneaziatskii Sbornik*, II, Moscow, 1966, 134-157, and in the same authors' "Parfianskoye tsarskoe khozyaistvo v Nise I veka do n.e.", *Vestnik drevney istorii*, 1960 (2), pp. 14-38. Western students will find M. Sznycer, "Nouveaux ostraca de Nisa", *Semitica*, XII, 1962, 105-126, the most convenient entry to the subject.

<sup>2</sup> I. M. Diakonov and K. B. Starkova, "Nadpisi Artaksiya (Artakša I), tsarya Armenii", *Vestnik drevney istorii*, LII, 1955, 167.

<sup>3</sup> Diakonov and Livshits (1960), p. 103 and Plate.

<sup>4</sup> The mechanism of ideographic writing is explained by W. B. Henning, "Mitteliranisch", *Handbuch der Orientalistik*, IV Band, Iranistik, Erster Abschnitt, p. 30.

<sup>5</sup> *op. cit.*, p. 105.

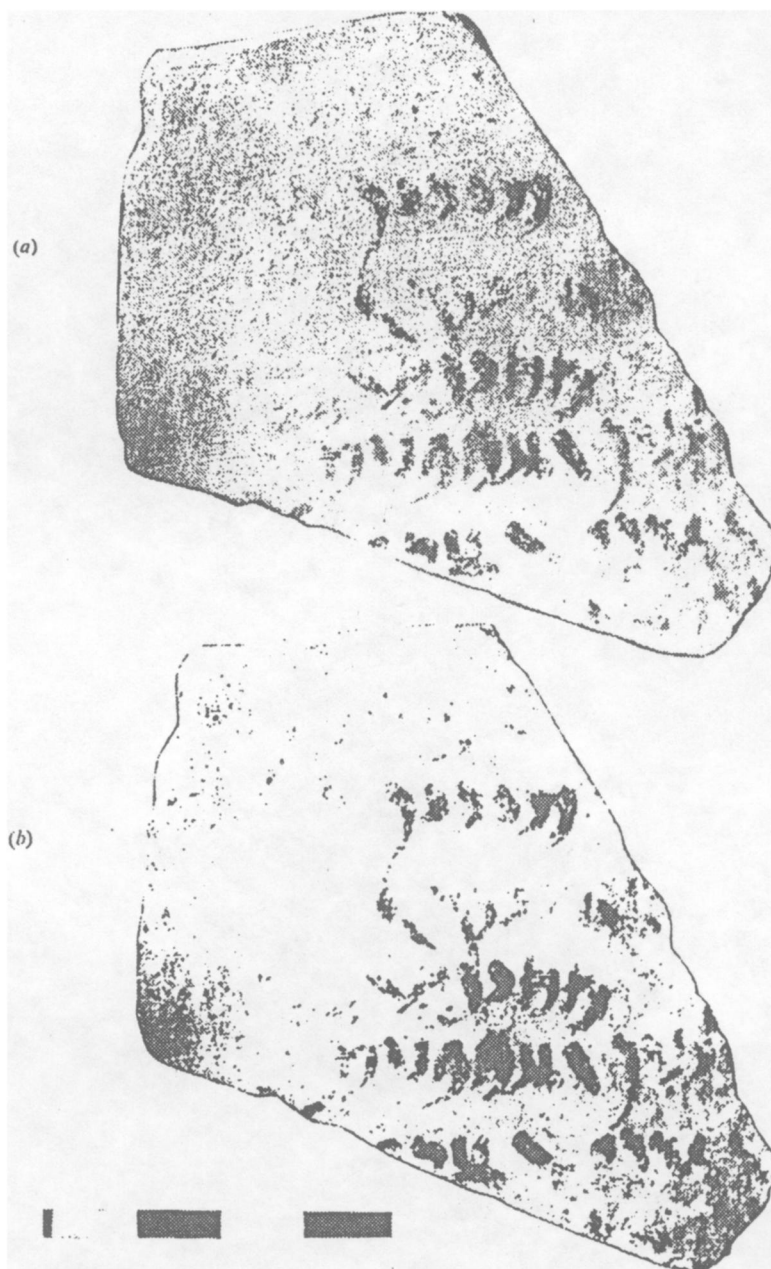
considerable conviction, but the problem of their language is still not finally resolved. Thus every additional ostrakon that comes to hand is of interest for the light it may throw upon this question.

Some 2,000 ostraca have been excavated at Nisā, but their contents appear to be rather stereotyped, and not many more than 50 have yet been photographically reproduced, while perhaps 200 have been read and translated. Almost every one of the published texts belongs to what may be called the "Wine Series": the group of texts detailing consignments of wine, of numerous varieties and ledger categories, to the royal store ('*l gnz' mlk*'), and other official recipients. Such texts are easily recognized by their "key-words", of which *ḥbr* 'the jar', *krm* 'the vineyard', and *lmr* "wine" are amongst the most obvious. Since tolerable Aramaic syntax is observed throughout, each word should consist of no more than three consonant-radicals (the usual Semitic structure), augmented as necessary by the various "servile letters" according to the strict grammatical pattern. Long words with consonant clusters would present an unusual feature, apart from the various Iranian names and technicalities. In view of the large number of unpublished Nisā ostraca, it is possible to imagine that other types were found besides the "Wine Series". We may conjecture that amongst the residue of fragmentary, defaced, and generally unpromising specimens that any large excavation may be expected to produce, documents of different function and content may some day be detected. For the time being, naturally, such thoughts belong to the realm of speculation. It will be seen that the document with which we are concerned here is of an entirely different character from the "Wine Series", and for any help which may be expected from the Nisā material in the elucidation of its layout we shall need to await the appearance of a final corpus from that site. A closer analogy for subject-matter is, however, provided by two difficult ostraca lately reproduced by Professor R. N. Frye in *Corpus inscriptionum iranicarum* (Pt. III, Vol. III: *Dura-Europus*, Portfolio I; Pl. XXVII, 23-4) where certain readings had been proposed by the late Professor W. B. Henning, *Gnomon*, XXVI, 1954, 478-9, and seem to represent lists of names, with numerals of uncertain purport.

Turning now to the Qūmis text, we see that it is divided by a number of oblique strokes (↘). Such marks do not represent any character of the Parthian alphabet, and there is nothing similar on the photographs from Nisā. However, the Nisā texts do employ a rather similar horizontal stroke (—), which is a mark of punctuation introducing numerals and quantities. We may take it therefore that the oblique stroke at Qūmis is either a mark of punctuation, and its suggested purpose an item-mark, or that once more a numerical value is intended.

The second unusual feature of the Qūmis text is that no indication of syntax is to be seen in it. The relative particle *zy*, the 'ālep of the determined state, the prepositions *mn*, '*l*, and so on, are all quickly obvious in even a fragmentary Aramaic text, but they are not present here. Nor are there any of the "key-words" typical of the "Wine Series". Moreover, since the view prevails that the language of those ostraca is essentially Aramaic, whilst here the letter groups contain more consonants than is possible for an Aramaic word, and do not conform to the Semitic pattern, the only plausible solution seems to be that the document is a list of Iranian personal names,\* each divided from that following by the mark of punctu-

\* The nominal roll of Iranian names from Nisā is given by Diakonov and Livshits (1960), pp. 23-24.



The Qūmis ostrakon (a) normal print (b) print with increased contrast. Scale of centimetres.

ation. Our transliteration will proceed on that hypothesis. In the letterpress the colon represents the oblique stroke. Until parallel documents come to light, or the missing fragments of this one are recovered on the site, it is impossible to decide for what purpose such a list would have been prepared. Evidently, the sherd was broken *after* having been inscribed. The precarious nature of the material makes it necessary to emphasize that any reading is offered with reservations.

1. Tyrn
2. ](') . . . brk:
3. vv (P)tyz(y):
4. ]myk: 'pp('t)
5. ]..rdy: '(t).[
6. .

## COMMENTARY

I. 1 The personal name Tyrn (Tirēn) "like the god Tir" is well attested, e.g. in the Avroman Parchment.<sup>7</sup> Nisā has the diminutive Tirynek (Tirēnak).<sup>8</sup> Comparable forms are Mtryn (Mihrēn),<sup>9</sup> Māhēn.<sup>10</sup> Dr. Gropp, who saw the Qūmis ostrakon soon after its discovery, suggested the reading Swryn (Sūrēn), which must also be considered, and which pointed the way to the reading in our text. Sūrēn is of course the well-known family name and hereditary title.<sup>11</sup> Another reading which has suggested itself is Hwdyn (Hūdēn) "He of good faith", listed by F. Justi (*Iranisches Namenbuch*, p. 490, Hūdīn) in an appendix, but not in his main register. It will be appreciated that a choice amongst these three readings depends almost entirely upon the view taken of the initial, critical letter. Since this is an otherwise unknown hand, and not a single character can be verified from the context, a dogmatic attitude would be inappropriate, but to the present editor the profile of the second character favours *yōd* rather than *wāw*.

I. 2 Three or four characters are poorly preserved. The first looks like 'ālep. There would be no difficulty in presuming an Iranian name ending in -bārak, cf. Justi, p. 488, but the obvious restoration 'spbrk (Aspabārak "little horseman") hardly fits the traces.

I. 3 This line is in some ways the most puzzling. At one time the reading *styr* (*satēr*) was even contemplated, which would imply that the list was a record of payments made in silver tetradrachms, presumably of the older Seleucid types, since the Parthians are believed not to have minted tetradrachms on the plateau. However, the fourth character does not seem to have the hook of a *rēš*, and this interpretation is too bold. It is easier to suppose that all the words are names, of which many could be unattested.

<sup>7</sup> H. S. Nyberg, "The Pahlavi documents from Avroman", *Le monde oriental*, XVII, 1923, 192.

<sup>8</sup> Diakonov and Livshits (1960), p. 24.

<sup>9</sup> Attested on the British Museum Sasanian seal BM 119617; already during the Achaemenid period on a cuneiform tablet noted by Leon Legrain, *The culture of the Babylonians* (Univ. of Pennsylvania. The University Museum, Pubns. of the Babylonian Section XIV), Philadelphia, 1925, p. 340, no. 887.

<sup>10</sup> Lately reported for the 1st century B.C. in the Greek spelling of the genitive MAXHNHC, upon an Indo-Scythian coin, by G. Le Rider, "Monnaies de Taxila et d'Arachosie", *Revue des Etudes Grecques*, LXXX, 1967, 341.

<sup>11</sup> cf. the Pahlavi inscription *Shāpūr KZ*, II. 23 and 25 (Parthian text), II. 57 and 62 (Greek text). These may be consulted in A. Maricq, "Classica et Orientalia. 5. Res Gestae Divi Saporis", *Syria*, XXXV, 1958, 323-4, whose line-numbering is that of the Greek text.

l. 4 There could be many Iranian names ending in *-myk*. Nisā has *Hwmyk* (Hūmik),<sup>12</sup> but here there is nothing to determine the first letters of the word. The first character of the line would hardly be *qōp*, since that could appear only in Aramaic words, or later in ideograms. The word after the mark of punctuation is again difficult. The second and third letters have every appearance of being *pē*. It would be tempting to think of the numeral *hpt* 'seventy', again in harmony with the theory of a list of cash payments, but this is hardly sound. The third and fifth letters are by no means identical, as that reading requires. It is true that in Pahlavi, numbers up to ten are designated by Aramaic ideograms, and the higher numerals by their Iranian forms. If the language of these ostraca was ideographic Parthian high numbers might again be in Iranian. But there is so far no precedent for the writing of numerals with words rather than figures in these ostraca. On the other hand, it hardly assists the interpretation to take the last letter for *sāmek*.

l. 5 The readings of this line are highly problematical. If the second name begins with *'t*- it could of course be any of the common Iranian names compounded with *Ātūr*- "Fire". Nisā has *'trwmtrk* (Ātrōmihrak).<sup>13</sup>

The ostracon from Qūmis is without doubt in Parthian script of c. 1st century B.C. With such inadequate material it would be unwise to insist too strongly on the reading of any particular letter, though the purport may become clearer if adequate comparanda for this site should come to hand. Evidently the document is quite unlike the "Wine Series" from Nisā, and seems to represent a class of ostraca hitherto unknown. This is in itself a discovery of value. The likeliest theory at the moment is that it represents a list of personal names. It would be too rash at present to go further, and claim it as list of payments in cash made by the persons named. For the unexplained words could more easily be accounted for as further unrecognized or unattested names than as sums of money.

<sup>12</sup> Diakonov and Livshits (1960), p. 24.

<sup>13</sup> Diakonov and Livshits (1960), p. 23.